

August 11, 1998

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PSC TO DECIDE FRIDAY WHETHER TO HOLD HEARING NEXT WEEK

ON US WEST'S REQUEST TO ENTER EXPANDED LONG-DISTANCE MARKET

The state Public Service Commission will decide Friday whether to go ahead with the hearing that has been scheduled to begin next week on US West Communication's request for a favorable recommendation from the PSC to the Federal Communications Commission when the company applies for permission to provide additional long-distance service in Montana.

Active intervenors in the case, including the Montana Consumer Counsel and long-distance companies AT&T, Sprint, MCI, Eclipse, Skyland Technologies and Touch America, have asked the PSC to summarily reject US West's filing because they contend the evidence provided by US West in the proceeding fails, on its face, to meet the requirements of Section 271 of the federal Telecommunications Act. Alternatives to rejection of the filing that were suggested by various intervenors include directing US West to withdraw its application until its defects are remedied or beginning a collaborative process among US West and the intervenors to address and resolve the issues in the case.

The PSC directed US West to respond to the intervenors' motion by 5 p.m. Wednesday.

A federal court settlement in the 1980s had limited US West and other Bell operating companies to providing long-distance service only within geographical areas known as LATAs. There are two LATAs in Montana -- east and west -- and US West can now provide only intraLATA long-distance service.

Section 271 of the federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 allows US West to provide long-distance service in its 14-state region and outside of the LATAs if the company can prove it complies with certain conditions regarding interconnections with competitors and with a 14-point checklist meant to ensure the company has opened its local telephone market to competition.

US West notified the PSC on March 30 of its intent to file a request with the FCC to offer this in-region, interLATA long-distance service and asked for a favorable recommendation from the state commission to the FCC. Under federal law, the FCC must consult with the PSC in determining whether US West has complied with the interconnection and checklist requirements.

If the PSC grants the motion for summary judgment, the hearing set for next week will be cancelled. If the PSC denies the motion, what is expected to be a week-long hearing will begin at 10 a.m. Monday, August 17, in Helena. The hearing will be held at the state Department of Transportation auditorium, 2701 Prospect Ave., and will begin at 8:30 a.m. each day after Monday.

Montana is the first state in which US West has filed a Section 271 application. To date, the FCC has not approved any of the Section 271 applications it has received from other phone companies.

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